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Fertile Ground for Collaboration: Investing in Community–University Partnerships with Soil Money

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Any avid gardener will tell you that planting seeds is not enough to ensure an abundant harvest. While you might get lucky and hit a patch of fertile ground, you will likely have more success if you first prepare the soil. Community–university partnerships (CUPs) require the same investment. Just as soil provides the physical foundation for plant growth, relationship building between communities and researchers provides the foundation for productive and sustained CUPs. In that vein, we argue that successful CUPs not only require seed money to initiate projects, but soil money to cultivate strong, resilient, and productive partnerships.

There is increasing pressure for scientists to demonstrate the societal relevance of their work (Keeler et al. 2017). Many scientists achieve this through partnership with community organizations. Yet, whether CUPs are effective, and for whom they are effective, is poorly understood, partly because partnerships are often formed under conditions that are driven by funding and academic publishing opportunities. This may ultimately shortchange the potential benefits to scientific innovation and the ability of science to contribute toward social benefit. Partnerships formed through the exploration and definition of mutual interests may yield more impactful work (London et al. 2017). Soil money directly addresses

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one of the challenges faced by many budding CUPs—establishing and sustaining strong and resilient CUPs before a funding opportunity arises.

Universities currently support CUPs in several ways, for example, seed money that supports emerging projects. In addition, some universities maintain centers that facilitate connections between campus and the community. However, these mechanisms do not directly fund relationship building among researchers and the community. Academia's limited investment in CUPs is compounded by an increasingly competitive funding climate, with interdisciplinary funding (the focus of many CUPs) becoming more limited (Bromham et al. 2016). In addition, within the current funding system, engagement can be superficial. For example, the broader impacts requirement of a National Science Foundation proposal encourages application of research findings to management or policy; however, it rarely drives the direction of research and is sometimes viewed as an obligatory recognition of potential social benefit, rather than an opportunity to engage with communities. Soil money could foster relationships that allow the broadest impacts where community members are repositioned from "study participant" to "research partner" not only shaping what research happens, but how research happens, fostering community empowerment, co-learning, and linking our research to policy and action (Balazs and Morello-Frosch 2013). While most emphasis on interdisciplinary research has focused on improving the reach of our research across traditional disciplinary boundaries, community-engaged research also has the power to improve our science, through improved relevance (asking the right questions for our system and collaborative group) and rigor (the practice and promotion of good science; Balazs and Morello-Frosch 2013).

Much of the complexity associated with CUPs comes from navigating a vast network of collaborators and partners with different disciplinary perspectives, goals, and levels of power and privilege (London et al. 2017). As such, supporting community–university relationships may involve identifying and addressing social legacies, including strained community–university relationships that have experienced uneven power dynamics, an extractive culture, and practices that have perpetuated limited access to higher education (Speed 2008, Minkler and Wallerstein 2010, Smith 2012). Activities supported by soil money could complement efforts to promote inclusion and diversity, helping to address historical barriers between communities and universities that have weakened our science by marginalizing voices.

Soil money requires flexibility to allow for creative ways to initiate and sustain CUPs and must support both researchers and community members. Funds may support community scholars that provide informal instruction or seminars, develop joint projects, or write community grants. Funds could support travel to community meetings, pay rental fees for meeting space so researchers can meet stakeholders in their community, or provide funding for workshops and training in cultural humility and other needed skills to excel in community-engaged scholarship (Tervalon et al. 1998). The success of soil money can be assessed; however, CUPs require different models for assessment, in both how participants define success and value outcomes. For example, essential to evaluating outcomes is recognizing that the basis for making causal claims is fundamentally different for participatory approaches (compared to theory-based or experimental approaches) in that assessment hinges on validations by the participants themselves that change is caused by the intervention (Gates and Dyson 2017).

By directly supporting relationship building, soil money provides a foundation from which relationships can evolve and be sustained. Soil money itself will not automatically create effective partnerships,

but it is an essential component to overcoming the known limitations of modes of science in which communities are considered only as potential end users.

Constantly harvesting from your garden without providing resources to the soil is unsustainable—likewise, we cannot continue to reap the benefits of CUPs without investing in the process of cultivation.

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